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Support by the United Nations system of the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolutions 50/133 of 20 December 1995 and 51/31 of 6 December 1996, the General Assembly welcomed the two reports of the Secretary-General on the ways and mechanisms in which the United Nations system could support the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies (A/50/332 and Corr.1 and A/51/512) and commended the activities undertaken at the request of Governments to support the efforts to consolidate democracy, as reflected in those reports. The Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to continue to improve the capacity of the Organization to respond effectively to the requests of Member States in their efforts to achieve the goal of democratization. As a result of those and other requests, the work of the United Nations system has expanded rapidly in this area.

2. Resolution 51/31 asked the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its fifty-second session a report on its implementation. The Assembly specified that the report should include "innovative ways and means, as well as other reflections, to enable the Organization to respond effectively and in an integrated manner to requests of Member States for assistance in the field of democratization." The present report is submitted pursuant to that request.

3. The movement of new or restored democracies and its world conferences have given a strong momentum to the process of global and regional democratization. Although the international conferences of new or restored democracies started quite independently from the United Nations in the late 1980s, since the second world conference in 1994 the United Nations has become more actively involved.

4. The first international conference, called the International Conference of Newly Restored Democracies, was held at Manila from 3 to 6 June 1988 with 13 States participating. The Conference adopted the Manila Declaration (A/43/538), which highlighted the fact that, with mutual support, internal and external forces endangering emerging democracies could be overcome. That feeling of a constant threat to the fragile process of democratization was the initial impetus for joint action by a small number of States. But as many more States — now about half of the United Nations membership — and other partners have participated in the conferences, the movement has gained more of an international and global character.

5. The second, much wider International Conference of New or Restored Democracies was held at Managua from 4 to 6 July 1994. The Managua Declaration and Plan of Action (A/49/713, annexes I and II) requested the Secretary-General to undertake a comprehensive study of how the United Nations system could support the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies. The General Assembly, in its first resolution on the subject, resolution 49/30 of 7 December 1994, supported that request. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's first report on new or restored democracies was issued on 7 August 1995 (A/50/332 and Corr.1) and the second a year later, on 18 October 1996 (A/51/512). On 20 December 1996, he issued a supplement to his two earlier reports (A/51/761) that was later published as *An Agenda for Democratization*.[1]

6. The three reports of the former Secretary-General on new or restored democracies contribute significantly to the process of providing a solid foundation for the eventual formation of a new and flexible framework for the United Nations system in the fields of democratization and governance, two key concepts which I believe should stand together.

7. When I addressed the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity at Harare in June, I laid down my own vision for a democratic Africa as a first step in the process of deepening our understanding of the true principles of democracy. I referred to the need for the whole United Nations system to provide concrete assistance to countries that ask for our help in various ways related to democracy, governance and development. It is my firm belief that the United Nations system can help the democratization process more effectively than it does at present.

8. My predecessor, in the above-mentioned reports, provided a detailed account of activities of the United Nations system with regard to democratization. That account remains extremely useful information for Member States. However, it is not necessary for such an inventory to be prepared every year. The present report therefore concentrates on policies and principles, while giving an account of relevant recent events which are shaping the emerging framework for intergovernmental action in the field of democratization.

II. Recent international events on democratization and governance

A. Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies on Democracy and Development

9. By resolution 51/31 of 6 December 1996, the General Assembly invited the Secretary-General, Member States, the relevant specialized agencies and bodies of the United Nations system, as well as other intergovernmental organizations, to collaborate in the holding of the Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies on Democracy and Development. The Conference took place at Bucharest from 2 to 4 September 1997. Secretariat staff, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other partners, worked intensively with the Romanian hosts in the preparation of the Conference and contributed to its success. The document adopted by the Conference, entitled "Progress Review and Recommendations", was issued on 11 September 1997 (see A/52/334). Summaries of the principal statements made and papers presented to the Conference and of the debates were published by UNDP.[2]

10. About 80 governmental delegations from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America participated in the Conference, 23 of them being represented at ministerial level, and 14 international organizations were present. In addition, 47 non-governmental organizations from 20 countries took part in the Civil Society Forum. To stress transparency and openness, representatives of the media had full access to all sessions of the Conference. Its discussions and recommendations were forward-looking and practical; the present report makes every effort to take them into account and respond to them.

11. The Bucharest Conference, together with the International Conference on Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity, organized by UNDP and held in New York in July 1997 (see below), marks the gradual start of new thinking on international cooperation in this area. That governance and democratization are coming to the fore of international debates on sustainable development and peace-building was also reflected in the thematic orientation of my first report on the work of the Organization.[3] The driving forces for change are strong; they are coming from South and North, from both the developed and developing world, and cannot be ignored.

12. The papers presented to the Conference assessing the progress in democratization in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, written by regional experts, stressed that the process of democratization is irreversible, although there might be occasional, even major, setbacks. There are still severe threats to fragile democracies in specific regions, and the international community should provide more assistance in combating those threats. In that process, the strengthening of civil society is key in all regions, it was agreed. The need for a reform of State structures and functions and the crucial role of the elites — which could be positive and negative in a transition — were also stressed.

13. Meanwhile, donors are increasingly emphasizing the virtues of democratization and good governance in their guidelines for aid programmes. The Conference encouraged this trend by stating that as "governance and democratization issues are becoming more and more the pillars of sustainable development, the donors should take this fully into account in their funding priorities". It also reaffirmed that international assistance for democratization and reform needs to be tailored to fit into the broader political, cultural and social circumstances in each country.

14. One important question raised during the Conference was how to monitor progress in democratization. The document adopted by the Conference proposed that one way to do this is to develop indicators. The Conference recommended that a specific mechanism, that would include representatives of the United Nations system, should be established to follow up on its results. The recommendations addressed to the United Nations system also asked, among other things, that the Bretton Woods institutions and other sectors of the United Nations dealing with governance, democratization and peace-building should have more frequent contacts and cooperation.

B. International Conference on Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity

15. The International Conference on Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity, held in New York from 28 to 30 July 1997, provided a high-level forum for representatives of Governments, parliaments, local authorities, civil society organizations and agencies of the United Nations system to share experiences and best practices related to democratic governance.

16. The Conference was organized by UNDP in collaboration with a number of other United Nations organs such as the Department for Development Support and

Management Services of the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and with international organizations such as the International Union of Local Authorities, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and CIVICUS-World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The rationale for the Conference rested on two main factors. First, while there is worldwide acceptance of the significance of good governance as a major driving force of development, much still needs to be done to improve our understanding of the issues involved. Second, there is growing recognition of the limitations of modern forms of governance, and these too need to be better understood.

17. The Conference concluded that good governance is effective, participatory, transparent, accountable and equitable and promotes the rule of law. Governance is led by the State, but transcends it by collaborating with the private sector and civil society. All three domains are critical for sustaining human development. The state creates a conducive political, economic and legal environment. The private sector generates jobs and income, and civil society facilitates political and social interaction and mobilizes groups to participate in economic, social and political activities.

18. There have been few conferences on governance which have brought together as diverse a range of interested parties. The response to the Conference, which far exceeded the organizers' expectations, was overwhelming, resulting in more than 1,000 delegates participating from most of the States Members of the United Nations. Combining governmental representatives with those of civil society in the General Assembly Hall was also an unprecedented event.

C. Seminars organized together with civil society

19. In order for the United Nations to play a useful role in helping new or restored democracies, past experience and new ideas and suggestions put forward by Governments and representatives of academia and civil society will need to be taken into account. My report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform", issued on 14 July 1997 (A/51/950), referred to the vital contribution that the research community and non-governmental organizations is providing to the United Nations system. It was also emphasized that new mechanisms and procedures should be devised to engender more systematic and regular contacts between academia, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations.

20. The first steps have been taken to foster an improved relationship between the United Nations and civil society in matters related to democratization and governance. A number of conferences and seminars have been held as a result of cooperation with the entities of the United Nations system, civil society and the research community. These have brought together leading scholars and representatives of Governments, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations and the business sector to discuss issues of democratization, governance and development. The goal has been to identify problems, themes and recommendations that, after further elaboration, could be brought to the attention of the international community by the United Nations for debate and action.

21. In addition, civil society representatives have organized expert seminars explicitly to follow up on the former Secretary-General's reports on new or restored democracies or to reflect on a subregional experience in democratization. One such seminar took place in May 1997 at Imatra (Finland) and nearby Svetogorsk (Russia) to address in depth the problems and prospects of democratization in Russia and the Baltic States. The results of the seminar were included in the documentation of the Bucharest Conference.

22. It is to be hoped that the collaboration with civil society can be continued and strengthened, in part through the organization of similar seminars and conferences in different regions of the world. In this regard, civil society can make an important contribution to the process of reflection on concrete regional problems and on specific actions to be undertaken by the United Nations system to address those problems. The United Nations stands ready to cooperate with the representatives and organizations of civil society in this endeavour.

III. A new understanding of democratization

A. Towards an agenda for democratization and governance

23. My predecessor took an important step forward in advancing discussion of democratization in his report to the General Assembly of 20 December 1996 (A/51/761, especially section VI, entitled "Conclusion: towards an agenda for democratization"). However, much remains to be done to clarify that this agenda should be understood as a flexible conceptual framework. Such a framework would

be based on the concept of governance, which would inspire the work of civil society, Governments and the United Nations system in this expanding area. It should help ensure that assistance to both democratization and governance is consistent and efficient and better integrated with the other work of the Organization.

24. The Subgroup on Capacity Building for Governance of the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) presented its findings and recommendations on the approaches and experiences of the United Nations system on governance on 15 June 1997. Nineteen United Nations organizations participated in the work under the chairmanship of UNDP. The Subgroup studied, among other things, the principles of good governance emphasized by the United Nations agencies in their definitions of governance. Those principles are: (1) an effective public sector; (2) accountability/transparency of processes and institutions; (3) effective participation of civil society political empowerment; (4) effective decentralization of power; (5) access to knowledge, information and education; (6) political pluralism/freedom of association and expression; (7) rule of law/respect for human rights; (8) legitimacy/consensus; (9) attitudes and values fostering responsibility, solidarity and tolerance; (10) equity/voice for the poor; and (11) gender equality.

25. Those eleven principles of good governance also reflect the fundamental principles of a democratic society. If an additional twelfth principle — free and fair elections — is added, all essential elements for a solid framework for democratization assistance by the United Nations anywhere in the world today would be in place. However, that approach also suggests that the provision of electoral assistance should be undertaken in the context of wider assistance to governance, with programmes in the two areas increasingly developed and implemented together.

26. A joint agenda for democratization and governance also provides a welcome opportunity to bridge the existing gap between the peace and development agendas of the United Nations. That gap — whether real or imagined — has created tensions within the United Nations membership and claims that one or the other agenda has taken over the priorities and the resources of the Organization. Efforts to promote democracy and good governance are fundamental to the consolidation of peace and development, as the Agenda for Development, approved by the General Assembly on 20 June 1997 in resolution 51/240 recognized. Peace, development, democratization, governance and human rights are, of course, complementary, representing important aspects of the objectives established in the Charter of the United Nations.

27. The complex nature of the relationship between those concepts underlines the importance of avoiding any misunderstandings about the nature and scope of the work of the United Nations in the field of democratization. The United Nations system, in assisting and supporting the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies, and democratization in general, does not endorse or promote any specific form of government. Democracy is not a model to be copied but a goal to be attained. Furthermore, the pace at which democratization can proceed is dependent on a variety of political, economic, social and cultural factors proper to the circumstances of a particular culture and society.

28. In practice, the distinction of the various components of democratization, their mutual interrelationships and their exact relation to existing programmes in support of peace and development constitute a challenging undertaking. However, if a broad view of the mutually reinforcing relationship of those concepts is taken, members of the international community can move to a new phase and develop plans jointly with the United Nations in order to implement specific strategies in promoting democratization within a truly multidisciplinary, inter-agency framework.

B. Elections and democratization

29. In reviewing the experience of the United Nations in electoral assistance, an important characteristic of both international and domestic observation has been its concentration on elections to the relative exclusion of other aspects of the democratic process. As the observation of elections derives from our universal interest in democracy, conducting such observation in isolation from other activities provides a very narrow framework.

30. The observation of elections alone will therefore not suffice as a yardstick for measuring democratization. Rather it should be undertaken in concert with more long-term efforts to consolidate democracy. That would require a significant change in the way electoral assistance is provided. In the case of domestic observation, the change of focus is easier; there are already many cases in which the organizations that observe elections redefine their functions so as to continue observing the behaviour of the elected officials and the fulfilment of election promises. International assistance is more complex and should be considered on a case by case basis in coordination with other activities in the field of democratization and governance that may be undertaken in a particular country.

C. The role of civil society and the private sector in democratization

31. A particularly welcome development at the Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies was the inclusion of the Civil Society Forum in the proceedings. In my July report (A/51/950), I stated that the emergence of civil society is linked to two interlocking processes: the quest for a more democratic, transparent, accountable and enabling governance, and the increasing preponderance of market-based approaches to national and global economic management. These have resulted in a redefinition of the role of the State and vested new and broader responsibilities in market and civil society actors in the pursuit of growth and well-being. In this overall context, a vibrant civil society is critical to processes of democratization and empowerment and needs to be recognized as such by the international community.

32. Development of civil society and a democratic culture of participation will take much longer than the establishment of political institutions. However, a vital civil society and a culture of participation are effective ways and means of cementing the democratic commitment of the whole population. Similarly, an active civil society can play a valuable role in strengthening the Government and vitalizing the market economy. Independence of the governing structures should be maintained in order to secure the trust of people as well as their critical and creative role in the democratization of a country.

33. Enabling non-governmental organizations to contribute, as they increasingly do, to the proceedings of international, regional and global organizations and systems of governance is also important. The extent to which Governments allow civil society structures both to be independent and to contribute to policy processes can itself be used as a measurement of the commitment to democracy among ruling elites.

34. The private sector also has a crucial role to play in the consolidation of democracy and the promotion of sustainable human development. It has the ability to distribute economic resources, increase economic efficiency and provide employment, thus improving the population's standards of living. However, when a transition to democracy and a market economy create economic distress, the trust of citizens in democratic rule may be deeply shaken. The ability of the private sector to respond to such concerns by, for example, expanding employment opportunities, depends to a great extent on the national policy framework, as well as trends in globalization and the global business environment which may be affecting the country's competitive position. More research is therefore needed on the links between globalization, including the role of financial markets, and threats to democratization.

35. The rule of law has been recognized as an important component of democratic transformations. Deficiencies in the observance of the rule of law will present major obstacles to the desired consolidation of a democracy and furthering of development. That the lack of a judicial system and fair business practices can hinder prospects of profitable and legal economic transactions will, for example, inevitably be of major concern to multinational corporations considering investing in transition economies. The process of institutional change and the development of an honest legal culture among the population in countries emerging from authoritarian rule will inevitably be slow.

36. The cooperation of all elements of the United Nations system engaged in mobilizing civil society to strengthen democracy and the rule of law should clearly be strengthened. In addition, the private sector, civil society, parliaments and Governments are expected to undertake their own initiatives to create regional councils, forums and networks to discuss and address jointly the daily problems of democratization. Initiatives in which the private sector and civil society work together to address concrete issues with Governments, parliaments, and the United Nations system and other international organizations in order to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies should be fully supported.

D. Gender, participation and democratization

37. Gender issues form an important component of many social and political cultures and, as such, have to be considered in the process of democratization. Together, men and women constitute civil society. The active participation of both sexes is an absolute necessity in a process of consolidating democracy. Social and political empowerment is a goal in various international treaties and covenants but there is still a long way to go in order to reach equality among men and women.

38. Discrimination against women undermines the democratic fabric of society and lessens the overall degree of participation of citizens. Mobilizing women reinvigorates civil society and improves long-term prospects for a lasting democracy. However, only a few countries have achieved

the minimum goal of 30 per cent participation of women in decision-making processes at the highest national level.

39. Gender equality is impossible without strong political commitment and fundamental changes in societal values. Stereotypes of the role and character of men and women need to be replaced by an all-encompassing view which accepts and respects all people as equally deserving of choice and opportunity in daily life, in the social and economic fields as well as in the political sphere. The United Nations will take this important aspect of democratization fully into account in further work in this area.

IV. Observations and recommendations

A. Electoral assistance

40. It remains necessary to pay due attention to the conduct of elections from an administrative and organizational point of view in order to encourage their being held in conditions that are as free and fair as possible. However, resources should also be devoted to reinforcing other institutions and processes essential to the consolidation of democracy.

41. Furthermore, the focus of observation should move from the international to the national level. Support should be provided to domestic organizations, both in the performance of their role as electoral observers and in the development of new functions as watchdogs of democracy. As the occasions in which the international observation of elections by the United Nations on a large scale is the preferred approach are becoming increasingly scarce, funds could, for example, be dedicated to improving the capacity of domestic observers and developing new and creative programmes to support other democratic institutions.

42. In the context of the reform process under way within the Organization, a general review should be undertaken of the ways and means by which the United Nations provides electoral assistance in the new circumstances of the world where democratization efforts have become more prevalent. Some proposals and ideas have been put forward within the reform framework now being implemented in the Secretariat. However, further steps, including wider consultation with Member States, are necessary.

B. Strengthening civil society

43. The Civil Society Forum proved to be a very useful innovation at the Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies. Its concluding declaration provided a perceptive analysis of the crucial nature of civil society in the democratization process. It warned about dangers of "direct democracy" when it disregards non-governmental organizations as representatives of citizens' interests, and it offered suggestions for Governments on how to establish appropriate legal frameworks for civil society.

44. In my July report to the General Assembly on United Nations reform (ibid.), I stated that "a series of gatherings involving eminent leaders of different sectors of civil society and the Secretary-General will be initiated". Democratization should be considered as a special issue at those gatherings. The results of the Bucharest Conference, and particularly its Civil Society Forum, will be an important subject of discussion.

45. Furthermore, I take note of the proposal of the Civil Society Forum that the United Nations should arrange a larger forum for representatives of non-governmental organizations to discuss democratization and the role of civil society in two years' time in order to follow up on the results of the Bucharest Conference. That proposal has a bearing on a recommendation in my July 1997 reform package that consideration should be given to encouraging representatives of civil society to hold a people's millennium assembly as a separate companion event to a special millennium assembly of the General Assembly in the year 2000. I will discuss those ideas further with the appropriate heads of United Nations agencies and will inform the General Assembly of the results in due course.

C. Coordinating United Nations activities in democratization and governance

46. I have drawn the attention of the international community to the need to clarify further the link between democratization, development and peace. The subject of many conferences and seminars, with conflicting views often expressed, this issue is one that has practical implications for the United Nations. That the peace-building and development, democratization and governance efforts of the Organization are distinct but mutually reinforcing underlines the importance for the United Nations system as a whole to improve its ability to cooperate and coordinate its actions.

47. The ACC Subgroup on Capacity Building for Governance, discussed earlier, expressed the problem of uncoordinated action in the field of governance as follows: "While the need for cooperative efforts based on clearly assigned responsibilities is generally acknowledged, there are relatively few instances of significant collaboration amongst United Nations organizations in the planning and implementation of governance programmes (with the notable exception of humanitarian emergencies)". In the past this lack of coordination and cooperation had been perhaps particularly marked in the areas of assistance to democratization and peace-building.

48. To counter the existing trend towards parochialism, in my reform package of July 1997 I proposed several measures to strengthen joint work and integrated planning among agencies. In January 1997, four Executive Committees were created in the areas that comprise the core missions of the United Nations: peace and security, economic and social affairs, development cooperation, and humanitarian affairs, with the fifth core area, human rights, designated as cutting across the first four and thus participating in all of them. The aim in establishing those Executive Committees was to sharpen the contribution that each unit makes to the overall objectives of the Organization by reducing duplication of effort and facilitating greater complementarity and coherence. Among other measures introduced by the July 1997 reform programme was the creation, in a time of rapid and complex changes, of a Strategic Planning Unit which would have access to the best available information and research relevant to policy and would provide me with appropriate recommendations.

49. The ACC Subgroup on Capacity Building for Governance made an important contribution to efforts to integrate planning and operational activities in the area of democratization and governance through its proposal that a common framework on governance should be elaborated in order to guide future country-level programming by the United Nations system in this area. While electoral assistance could profitably be included within such a framework, it is to be hoped that that proposal will facilitate the integration of more effective United Nations work on democratization and governance into the reform process as a whole.

D. Promoting democratization for the twenty-first century

50. The results of the Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies, discussed earlier, have important implications for the international community in the years ahead. The guidelines proposed for Governments are to a great extent in accordance with the principles offered to the General Assembly by the former Secretary-General and included by United Nations entities in their programmes on governance. The States gathered in Bucharest not only endorsed those proposals and ideals, but also enlarged the scope of the discussion to include such issues as the question of gender equality and the management of globalization.

51. The guidelines, principles and recommendations adopted by the Third International Conference are to be welcomed. It is to be hoped that they will be discussed by the General Assembly with due attention and vigour and that the Conference report will stimulate discussions on the programmatic aspects of United Nations operational activities related to development, governance and peace-building.

52. I take note with appreciation of the decision of the Third International Conference to hold the next conference in an African country. The United Nations system stands ready to contribute to the success of that conference in accordance with the request of the Bucharest Conference that the United Nations system form a part of its follow-up mechanism. In the previous conferences, invitations were extended to two categories of countries, invitees and observers. Consequently, only a proportion, although an increasingly large proportion, of the membership of the United Nations was able to attend. While it is advisable that future conferences should remain outside the direct sponsorship of the United Nations, consideration should perhaps be given to inviting all States Members of the United Nations.

53. As a universal concept, democracy has retained its appeal throughout the centuries. It has more practical relevance to United Nations activities now than ever before. In the late 1990s, the international community witnesses *coup d'états*, threats of rebellions, corruption of officials and problems in elections, governance and transitions to market-economies on a daily basis. All these difficulties are related to questions of democracy as the world approaches the twenty-first century. As the international community deals less with interstate wars and more with internal conflicts, democratization has gained an immediate relevance for millions who aspire to achieve its implementation. The United Nations has an obligation to these peoples across the world to devise a revitalized programme of work with greater unity of purpose and coherence of action. The system-wide process of reform on which the Organization is embarked provides a timely moment for it to do so.

Notes

[1] United Nations publication, Sales No. 97.I.3. (Published by the United Nations Office of Public Information, DPI/1867, December 1996.)

[2] *Third International Conference of the New or Restored Democracies on Democracy and Development.* Published in Bucharest, September 1997 (ISBN 973-9282-23-7).

[3] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-second Session, Supplement No. 1* (A/52/1).